

Shirley Dependency  
Near Shirley Post Office  
Charles City County  
Virginia

+ Shirley Plantation

HABS No. VA-<sup>388</sup>~~308~~

HABS  
VA  
19-SHIR,  
1-

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORIC AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA  
Virginia District

Historic American Buildings Survey

Prepared at Washington Office

## SHIRLEY

Shirley, Charles City County, Virginia

Owner: Mrs. Marian OliverDate of erection: c. 1765Builder-Owner: Charles CarterCondition: GoodDescription:

The mansion is of brick laid in Flemish bond and is almost square in plan. It is two full stories high below a heavy mansard roof. The two main elevations are treated with superimposed porticos with variations of the Tuscan orders in lower and upper colonnades. The crown mould of the lower order coincides with the string course of the second floor and is received by it. The main cornice of the house carries around the upper porch and is used for the rake of the pediment. This cornice is enriched with modillions and dentils.

The walls are divided half way of their height by a moulded and a gauged brick string course. The windows are also equal, all having twelve-over-twelve-light sashes. The wall within the three-bay porticos is plastered and whitened and contains a center door with a window on either side. The main elevations are five bays and the sides four bays. On one of these latter is a single-bay dwarf portico covering a side entrance.

An unfortunate feature of the house is its high mansard roof pierced by numerous large gabled dormers with twelve-over-eight sashes. Their scale is too large for the house and adversely affects the design. At the apex of the upper slope of the roof is a pineapple finial, and flanking it are a pair of large chimneystacks with moulded caps. It has been said that the roof and porticos are nineteenth-century additions, but the architectural evidence is that they are original. The further tradition that the seventeenth-century Hill house is incorporated in the present structure also appears undependable, as a complete examination of the house from roof to cellar disclosed no anachronisms of construction or design.

In plan Shirley resembles no other Virginia building, unless it be the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg. Each side of

the house is divided into two rooms, one large and one small. The large room to the north is the entrance and stair hall, and to the south are an entrance salon and dining room. There is no hallway in the usual sense of the word, the stairhall being the architectural feature of the house. It is fully paneled to the third floor and exhibits a superb stair, which for part of its height is suspended, without sidewall supports. The actual construction of this part of the stair is undetermined. The carriages themselves could not support it, because of the narrow width from the intersection of the tread and riser to the soffit. It is presumed that iron straps are laid in here. While one side of the stair is open here, the other is paneled in and this may help to stabilize the flight. The stair ascends in three flights, the first a short run of three risers, then a long run against the north wall, followed by a shorter return run. The stair is the open-string type with scrolled brackets which repeat their form across the whole width of the soffit of the upper staircases, giving a full scrolled soffit. The balusters are unique in Virginia in that the vase-turning is greater in diameter than the square of the shanks and therefore projects beyond them. The way in which this was done was to glue supplementary pieces at the point where the extra width was needed before the baluster was turned. Very few of the balusters remain complete, most of the supplementary pieces having fallen off. The trim of the stair is in walnut, though all paneling is painted, apparently on pine. This is divided into large regular panels above a sheathed dado with moulded base and cap, the latter enriched with an applied fret. The cornice is fully moulded with a coved bed mould, below which is a frieze with strap ornament. This is in the form of a fret with quatrefoils. The mantel has an architrave frame supporting a carved pulvinated frieze and a cornice. Above is a paneled overmantel.

The Drawing Room is the most elaborate of the rooms. Like the others it is fully paneled, but in addition to a dado similar to that in the hall it has a full entablature at the ceiling. Of this the frieze is pulvinated and the cornice modillioned. The doorways to the hall and to the exterior are similar: both double, with glazed transoms. The doorway to the dining room has an architrave frame with "dog ears," a pulvinated frieze, and a scrolled pediment with a pineapple finial. The cornice here also displays modillions. The mantel motive is extremely rich. The fireplace opening is faced with marble framed by a backband with crossettes and carved with egg and dart ornament. This supports a pulvinated frieze carved with laurel leaves and ribbons. The cornice-shelf is also carved. The overmantel-panel is framed by an architrave with crossettes, the backband carved and the face covered with applied scrolled strapwork.

The Dining Room woodwork is generally similar, though the doorway has an angular broken pediment with vase finial. The

Parlor has variations from the other rooms in the replacement of modillions in the main cornice and overdoor by dentils. The finial here is of pineapple form. The frieze of the main cornice is an interlacing Greek key, while that on the chair rail is the simple form.

The extent of the original work and its elaboration make Shirley one of the outstanding Virginia houses. It is fortunate in being in possession of descendants of the builders, through the Hill and Carter families, and in having preserved within it so much of its early furnishings and memorabilia.

Author:

*Thomas S. Waterman*

Approved:

*May 14, 1941*

*Parlor, Shirley, from Photographs of the Shirley House  
in November and May, 1941*

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

Addendum to  
Shirley

HABS No. VA-388

.4 mile southwest of State  
Route 608, 1.5 miles west  
of intersection with State  
Route 5  
Charles City vicinity  
Charles City County  
Virginia

HABS  
VA,  
19-SHIR,  
1-

PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240